

---

# Routledge International Handbook of Failure

*Edited by Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak,  
Anna Horolets, and Paweł Kubicki*

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-0-367-40404-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-37104-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-35595-0 (ebk)

1

## ***FAIL!* Are We Headed towards Critical Failure Studies?**

*Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak,  
Anna Horolets, and Paweł Kubicki*

---

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9780429355950-2

The funders: University of Warsaw, Poland. The publishing of this work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the research project “Failures and Public Policy: The Possible, the Contingent and the Chance in the Polish Context,” number 2019/33/B/HS5/00232.

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# FAIL! Are We Headed towards Critical Failure Studies?<sup>1</sup>

Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak,  
Anna Horolets, and Paweł Kubicki

---

Contemporary society is built on admitting failure and on acknowledging its transformative power as a trigger of social dynamics and individual destiny change. We are becoming more and more skilled in coming to terms with failure, in being grateful for the knowledge failure yields and for its emancipatory power. As the present Handbook shows, however, the contemporary success story of failure evolves at the expense of equality and transparency. Acknowledging failure is a gesture of gratitude and a statement of the importance of learning, but concomitantly it is an act imposing new inequalities and invisibilities.

How can we declare a new successful story of failure in a way that does not make us analytically vulnerable? How can we speak about regimes of failure without giving in to sociological *hubris*? How can we produce knowledge about failure that will not lead instead to a new rhetoric of failure and success? How can we democratize the *privilege of failure* in a manner that does not trigger new asymmetries?

These are some of the questions that have troubled us during the editing of the Handbook. One way or the other, they all boil down to *failure*, and the major themes of *inequality*, *invisibility*, *power*, *the future*, *the reimagining of neoliberal logics of success*, and *failure alternatives*. These processes are most frequently associated with contemporary crises. They converge recurrently in public narrative and routine talk surrounding present-day unexpected events, and future emergencies in the making, appearing in scholarly discourse and sociopolitical journalism around phenomena such as migration, climate change, political depression, progress in technology, and access to healthcare.

With this Handbook, we aim to reveal the emerging analytical frameworks and contributions on the substantive issue of failure in order to bring the intermittent instalments of the research on failure under the same roof. The Handbook articulates findings about failure coming from a diversity of angles, such as social theory, anthropology, organization theory, international relations, public policy, queer theory, disability studies, performance studies, narrative analysis, and cultural theory. Its aim is to show the theoretical linkages and brokerages that can be made between these

The publishing of this work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the research project “Failures and Public Policy: The Possible, the Contingent and the Chance in the Polish Context,” number 2019/33/B/HS5/00232.

fields and other disciplines, as well as the challenges, normative expectations, and analytical biases in the manner in which failure is problematized.

## Failure

The topic of the Handbook is failure, its manifestations in the contemporary world, and the modalities of dealing with it – both in theory and in practice.

Recent episodes of contingency (such as the financial crisis that started in 2008, the so-called refugee crisis that grasped the attention of public opinion in Europe in 2015, the coronavirus pandemic towards the end of 2019) boosted the research on failure in the social sciences. The relevant literature on failure is impressive – both in terms of the typologies that are proposed and the variety of case studies covered. At the same time, the existing body of literature is more taxonomical than theoretically integrative. Especially in the case of the social sciences, cumulative knowledge is under construction, and the study of failure only now moves towards operating with a canon or authority figures in the investigation of particular mechanisms. The Handbook sets out to systematize and more clearly articulate what the study of failure stands for. It aims to review what is usually studied as failure in the social sciences and related disciplines, how this is typically done, what the representative cases chosen for these studies are, and the key standpoints in the relevant debates. The Handbook also tackles how failures of the social sciences in dealing with certain issues can be seen as a chance for the enhancement of the disciplines' self-reflexivity and social relevance.

Not only is the concern with failure revitalized, but also a new modality of understanding failure takes shape. In recent work on failure the analytical focus is on the constitution of failure in our society – “regimes of failure” (Kurunmäki and Miller 2011), cultures of failure (see Lambert 2018), “ethics of failure” (Mercier nd), and “logics” of “identification” and “evaluation” of failure (see Bovens and ‘t Hart 2016). These structural and normative conditions that establish a given situation as failure, circumscribe what becomes recognized as failure at a discursive level, or prescribe how to recover from institutional failing. It is an evolution very much in line with the approach to failure initiated by Hirschman a few decades ago – see *fracasomania* [failure complex] (1973 [1963], 227) and “rhetoric of reaction” (1991). The subject of the reflection, thus, is not the failure as an event or occurrence but the manner in which the “rules of the game” (North 1994) regarding success and failure come into being and are institutionalized in our society.

Failure is usually seen as either an outcome of social action which people agree has gone astray, or an action that falls short of expectations as to what constitutes achievement. In this respect, recent work indicates how failure is not so much an event, a happening, or a situation but rather a complex mechanism of acknowledgements invested with power relations. This mechanism is influenced by the processes of economization, calculability, rhetoric and politics of productivity, and favorization of heterosexuality or able-bodiedness. Failure is thus an interactional nexus of expectations that evolves in close linkage with the society-economy-power interplay. It is a configuration that reflects the creative possibilities and structural vulnerabilities of our ideological, political, and economic systems.

These dynamics of how failure is understood result in failure studies that are currently in the making being quite *genealogical* in their methodology and exploration. They seem to be acting on the assumption that the analysis of failure events should take into consideration the non-linear process antecedent to the event (Foucault 1977b) as well as the temporal context, competing discourses, and the projections and anticipations of failure. This aspect of the analysis of failure is clearly observable in the explorations of the constitution of failure in the policy and economic models of neoliberalism.

Contemporary research on failure goes beyond establishing whether something is a failure or not, whether failure could have been avoided, or whether failure is an element of social construction and subjectivist interpretation. The complexity of the social processes inevitably calls for a genealogical exploration of why something is considered a failure and by whom, and what social dynamics these attributions produce. Further, recent work on failure also questions social imaginaries and projections of future success that are contingent on elements such as class, race, gender, age, and neocolonial relations. It claims the need to unravel, and make sense of potential alternatives to how policy, economic, and epistemological models streamline failure, failing, and eventual stories of success. This is why Appadurai and Alexander's (2020) work on failure, for instance, has been perceived as "unmasking failure" (Lavinás 2020). The authors issue therein an explicit statement that they accomplish a "critical exercise in understanding the discourse of failure in our times" (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 1), a "critique" of the "binary model of failure/success," or a so-called "refusal model" (Neta Alexander in Erkan 2020).

Yet, such genealogical and critical models of failure still require elaboration. This could be as an implicit or natural next step in an already existent approach set to unravel misfits and cracks in political and economic systems. Alternatively, such elaboration may come in the form of overt critical failure models which are issued by disciplines and theoretical perspectives that already have a record of advancing behavioural and identity alternatives on critical and genealogical bases. This is why this Handbook is particularly attentive to the analytical and critical vibes that manifest in the recent work on failure. It unravels how today failure is increasingly understood in relation to power, inequality, and mechanisms of coordination towards projected futures in the context of dominant policy and economic models, such as neoliberalism.

## **Resilience / Inequality and Invisibility**

Recent work on failure is devoted to unravelling the influence of the dynamic of power relations upon how contemporary regimes of failure are constituted. The language of risks and crises is now the language of failures and emergencies with implications at the level of how contemporary models of policymaking and governance are being framed. Best (2016) depicted this situation emblematically with the formula "when crises are failures" that entailed how the rhetoric of failure undergoes generalization and transformation.

Understanding what failure is and what failure becomes is essential in this context. Failure triggers an analytical interest in the attempts to ensure efficiency and build resilience. This is why, as the Handbook reveals, failure and the logic of failure continue to be a challenge for a variety of disciplines. Policy studies, for instance, are known for their explicit interest in policy failures and their persistence (Howlett, Ramesh, and Wu 2015), and in the puzzle of "policy learning" and "policy failure" (see Dunlop 2020). International relations and development, political economy and political sciences likewise have an outstanding and dynamic perspective on various shifts and currents in how the failure of international actors is being problematized (see Scott 1998; Stiglitz 2010; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Best 2014; Grabel 2017; Kruck, Kai, and Spencer 2018). Science and technology studies, and organization studies advance distinct taxonomies and understandings of the interplay between disasters, risks, accidents, and technological and organizational failures (Vaughan 1996; Perrow 1999; Beamish 2002; Haack and Rasche 2021). While economic sociology engages in zooming in on capitalism and market failures (Cassidy 2010; Streeck 2016; Frankel, Ossandón, and Pallesen 2019).

In these approaches, failure is an element in a broader engagement towards ensuring policy responses and governance mechanisms of effectiveness and resilience. This is why, in a number of cases failure comes to be seen as inevitable, as an unalienable part of the game. Success, efficiency,

learning, and resilience are achieved through steering failure, planning it, and redefining it as an element of policymaking and knowledge production. Successful failure occurs as the main failure model that guides current interpretations. In this context, the problem is not so much failure as such – derailment, errors and deviations in achieving stated aims – as the uncontrollability (Rosa 2020) of the world, the rapidly changing circumstances, and the contingency that render the conditions of our failure models obsolete.

While this understanding of failure in relation to the goals of efficiency and resilience is central for our organizational and everyday routines, recent models of failure that put explicit emphasis on inequality or invisibility indicate that we should be also acknowledging additional forms of failure. These forms, while mundane and seemingly small, entail neglect, a lack of access, and staying in a state of limbo, hopelessness, or blockage when trying to envisage and prepare for possible futures and overcome structural vulnerabilities. Alternatively, they can speak about ignorance, a lack of recognition, problematic integration (such as with technology), unequal treatment, unfair distribution of solutions, and vulnerability to collateral damage and externalities, as well as invisibilization and “economic cleansing” (Sassen 2016). Failure is not seen as valuable or as a tool of success but as a condition of limited access to the possibility of fulfilment and to the safety nets that would allow for the transformation of failure into success. Similarly, it is also seen as invisibility, marginalization, and prolonged subordination. Failure entails a general and holistic denial of perspective of development and maturity (in the case of identities that do not conform to mainstream expectations), of diminished possibility of reuse and recycling (abandoned architectural and technological projects and solutions), or of “strategic ignorance” (McGoey 2012) of systemic vulnerabilities.

In this second understanding of failure, oftentimes the framing comes up as negative and inverted. The approach goes beyond the experiencing of failure and takes issue with the fact that failure is not even there, is not consumed, or is not recognized. It is almost like a failure “deception” (Baines, Brewer, and Bay 2020, 745) that renders failure difficult to access. Employing this angle of a limited possibility of becoming, or of invisibilization of instances that should be given the status of failure allows us to see that failure in the classic understanding of not fulfilling a purposive action is almost a privilege. It entails social agents who make use of their potential, and engage with purposive action, even with the risk of failing. Appadurai and Alexander unravel how the license to fail manifests distinctively in the society, with failure triggering a variety of responses and ignorance-related behavioural patterns:

failure is a privilege: (some) men can “fail up,” while women almost always fail down (having their images circulate forever as a form of “revenge porn,” losing their jobs, or being held accountable for their mistakes as well as for the mistakes of others).

*Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 119*

A number of documents and reports of international organizations and related regulatory bodies of global processes (such as public health or migration) call for action against what we may call the inequality and invisibility of failure in international fields. This situation when failure is inequitably and unjustly programmed into the “rules of the game” is quite different from the early forms of the moralization of failure (especially, in an extreme form of linking it to sin) that has historically played an important role in the political and cultural legitimization of inequalities (cf. Ahmed 2010, on the moralization of happiness). Inequality and invisibility are currently acknowledged as failure in the public domain, while failure is framed as disparity, ignorance, and forgetfulness.

## Future

How failure is defined, is not just an issue of normative aims and public policy goals but it is also related to temporality. The orientation towards the future is probably the strongest development in the current problematization about failure. Irrespective of whether the concern is with efficiency and resilience, or with (in)equality, (in)visibility, and the possibility of social emancipation, failure occurs as an issue of the future. It is not simply something that happened but could have happened differently, wherein the projections occur retrospectively with regard to unexpected events which are subsequently presented that might have been anticipated (see Taleb 2007, for the case of “black swans”); it is also something that can be planned, expected, and designed in current models of policymaking and problem-solving that are based on failure.

Failure as future is particularly visible in the literature on the causes and persistence of public policy failures. Herein, failure narratives gained an increasingly future-oriented and anticipatory dimension. The contemporary context of crises and uncontrollability has redefined our relationship with failure. Failure has moved beyond being an issue that needs to be explained in policy studies. It has become an element that is imagined, projected, and expected to pose specific challenges for policymaking. Failure is now the future event, the imaginative resource for designing policymaking in conditions of rapidly changing circumstances. Policy studies plan, prepare, and anticipate coping with failure in relation to rapidly changing circumstances and future emergencies. This shows how in certain cases failure is even subjected to strategic employment, “crisis exploitation” (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell 2009), and the “‘dark side’ of policy behaviour” (Howlett 2022).

This evolution is closely linked with contingency, and attempts to design effectiveness, resilience, and robustness in the context of rapidly changing circumstances (Capano and Woo 2017). It resonates with broader inquiries in social and political studies that address critically so-called imaginaries and regimes of failure which take issue with the rhetoric of contingency and need to design resilience through policymaking (Eriksson and McConnell 2011). It is a perspective that speaks of policymaking through failure or failure-related mechanisms. It highlights strategic usage of uncertainty and instability, and the importance of politics in defining contingency or pushing forward similar public beliefs. Failure and contingency are not only burning issues that attract explanations and debates but also resources for policymaking.

Interestingly, the imaginary of failure in policy studies has not yet been taken up as an autonomous line of research, although there is concrete exploration on the manner in which failure is being framed, and what might be termed failure as narrative, or failure as policy culture. This has not yet been tackled in terms of expectation, projection, and anticipation of failure in policymaking. It is important, however, to indicate that the recent focus on the rapidly changing circumstances and related processes of instability and uncontrollability trigger to a lesser degree analytical frameworks on failure as such, and instead frameworks on its imaginaries.

Analytical discussion of the imaginaries of failure occurs predominantly in political studies of what may be termed the politics of preparedness for future emergencies. Planning and designing for future events in a culture of experts and public officials is frequently approached as a production of the imaginaries of failure and tackled primarily for its future failure poetics. Collier and Lakoff (2021), for instance, provide a revelatory genealogy of the discourse of emergency and preparedness in the American context, and how it came to be materialized in concrete political initiatives. This line of research resonates with the approaches entailing a strong critical drive and discussion of various forms of legitimacy reproduction in neoliberalism that entail imaginaries of the future and regimes of hope (Beckert 2020). Alternatively, it may intertwine with what

some authors deem “sociology of failure” (Yazell 2020), or simply failure as an element of the “sociological imagination” of distinctive possibilities, such as “migratory” or “climate futures” potentials (see Paterson 2016). Their proposals conjoin with critical theorizing on “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) and the “promise of happiness” (Ahmed 2010) that work at affective and moral levels and exacerbate inequalities. Others, however, tackle the spectrum and the triggering of new vulnerabilities, inequalities, and even feelings of “political depression” (see Frantzen 2019) or “lost futures” (Fisher 2014) in the context of contemporary unexpectedness and uncontrollability.

The discussion of the imaginaries of failure is also quite stringent in the models of failure connected with inequality and invisibility in the sense of projected marginalization due to lack of fit with mainstream norms of success that value heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and productivity. Paradoxically, in these instances the inequality and invisibility of failure is essentially projected onto the identities of individuals because of the lack of a projected future. Failure is a trait and situation subsequent to the perception of “no future” (Edelman 2004) and no development, that is, something that was supposed to occur according to the normative expectations in the society but has not, or even if it has, then at least not according to the norms of success and evolution that are prescribed in the dominant cultural and economic models.

## Neoliberalism

Alongside inequality, invisibility, power, and future, it is the intersection with neoliberalism that gives rhythm to recent failure studies. The epistemological, social, and political intersection of failure and neoliberalism entails explorations and analytical frameworks on failure that decode the mechanisms whereby regimes of failure (and norms of success) interact with other social processes in a manner that exacerbates exclusionary logics, and structural invisibilities and vulnerabilities in the framework of existent policy and economic models. Contemporary understanding of failure is embedded in exercises of challenging and reimagining that aim to advance an integral and open epistemology and move beyond existent models of failure that are found to be exclusionary and feeding the main dynamics of neoliberalism.

The regimes of failure are intrinsic for all high-modernity projects and grand narratives (see Scott 1998). The focus on neoliberalism in current work on failure stems from the fact that neoliberalism is a policy and economic model where success is at the core, and which inserts the success/failure binary in everyday and routine institutional logics. Neoliberalism is also the dominant ideology of contemporary times. This is being seen as influenced by calculability, orientated towards the future, and having a tendency to favour progress and development that is productive, masculine, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Neoliberalism, according to this reading, does not only bring about particular regimes of failure that are both an outcome and a resource of the dynamics of capitalism, but it also favours failure that, in a similar vein to neoliberalism, is itself unequal, invisibilizing, cancelling out, and prone to reproduce vulnerabilities and asymmetries.

Recent studies on failure envisage new rules of failure. Irrespective of whether this reimagination takes place in the framework of existing regimes of failure, or outside and against these, what is important is that this redefinition and search for failure alternatives takes place, and that it is a redefinition and exploration that goes beyond earlier efforts of reconstruction, counterfactual explanation, and interpretation. The idea is not so much that failures could have been avoided and learned from. Instead, it is that the very rules of failure have to be rethought in order to ensure a more democratic future failure regime. The critical appraisal of failure, although embedded in past and present experiences of failure, is first and foremost progressive, and oriented towards possible futures.



Another element constitutive of the reinterpretation of failure is that this takes place according to a logic that is reintegrative, anti-exclusionary, and intended to redraw the rules of achievement overall. It is no longer simply that something went wrong or that something could have occurred differently. Rather, it is that we might expect things to go astray, or that we should rethink what does not occur as it should as being another normal, or as an alternative. The model and aim in this theoretical context is not a failure-less, failure-deprived society, or one which instantly learns from its failures. Instead, it is one which democratizes failure, which creates safety nets, and which socializes in valuing and accepting failure in a way that leads to achievement and the inclusion of potentially revolutionary and alternative identities.

How does the reimagining unfold? The alternative accounts of failure and interpretations that are being launched come almost as acts of contestation. Such efforts emerge for instance in queer theory, disability studies, performance studies, and cultural theory, as well as architecture and urban failure theory. Herein, the exploration of failure moves beyond unexpected associations or collateral discoveries. It is an act of challenging existing norms of success, achievement, and exclusion, and even identity narratives. Failure exploration and alternative building unfolds as the problematization of existent regimes. These include: the a priori prescription of “no future” to queers in the contemporary politics of “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2004), the association of disability with “failings of body” in a context of “neoliberal-ableist capitalism” (Goodley et al. 2019) and “ableist expectations” (Goodley and Lawthom 2019), the conflation of falling and failing in incorporated cultural rhetoric and somatic practices that favour vertical representations and valuations (Albright 2019), and the hasty categorization as negative potentials and lost causes of projects that deviate from the usual standards in architecture (such as utility, aesthetics), followed by their almost strategic ignorance, neglect, and abandonment (Easterling 2019; Lahiji 2019).

The advancement of alternative regimes of failure entails reimagination and redefinition. Though several models might be distinguished here, what occurs perhaps as the most creative and counterintuitive exercise is less the rejection of failure but its revaluation on new terms, that is, the formulation of new rules of the game. Queer theory, illustratively, advances “curricular cripistemologies” and failure emancipation in the form of “crip art of failure” (Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware 2014) that resonates directly with “queer art of failure” as problematized by Halberstam (2011). Performance, dance, and martial arts studies draw attention to how new logics of falling might be appropriated by learning new somatics and body perceptions that may influence how we live and move in our world (O’Shea 2018; Albright 2019), while architecture theory proposes the reintegration of the heritage of failed projects as a new architectural energy – a “harnessing of failure” that might “reveal an emergent global geography of value” (Easterling 2019).

Failure and the possibility of a new imaginary of failure are communicated between distinct reflexive and analytical publics. Scholarly modalities of understanding failure are concordant with academic accounts, storytelling, and the sharing of experiences of failure with a broader audience. These latter analytical methods are what emerges as scattered yet recurrent acts of reinterpreting failure, with a strong accent placed on sense-making via engagement with various publics and audiences – performance of failure, theatres of failure (Bailes 2011; Fisher and Katsouraki 2018; Kaplan 2020), alternative worlds as the “other America” from “*mis-en-scène* of Auster and Jarmusch’s work and Waits’s lyrics and sound” (Tedde 2022), “Fail!” events (fail-sharing.org 2021), fail faster classes and workshops (Stanford d.school nd), or movements and online platforms for research, meetings, and podcasts that aim at reassessing failure at the global level such as “reconnecting architecture with the real world” (see Failed Architecture nd).

Though some of these reinterpretations seem to confirm and even reinforce the inequality and invisibility logics of failure in neoliberalism (see the phenomenon of Fuckup Nights, the



prestigious and rather exclusive global event series for sharing stories about professional and business failure), we should not dismiss how these manifestations allow for the expression of criticism and take issue with norms of success and achievement in our society. These are important for confronting the unequal distribution of access to public policies or the reproduction of structural vulnerabilities through education and heterosexual identity politics.

## Critical Failure Studies

What is the state of evolution and dynamics of exploration in the current work on failure?

By default, the exploration of failure and crises seems to be fuelled by the objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy, or what may be termed realist/constructivist (or realist/interpretivist) dualism. This basically entails two failure points of view. On the one hand, there is the realist angle that looks for proof in materialized forms of failure, which believes in measurable indicators of a lack of a fulfilled aim, or a lack of expected delivery. On the other hand, the constructivist approach that argues that failure is a matter of subjective perception, of how our imaginary of what failed and what has not failed is socially constructed.

This debate and analytical rivalry seem however to be in the past now. For one, its main lesson has already been learned. Failure is always framed; it feeds existent social constructions and also feeds upon them. Failure is also rhetoric and narrative, and it engages communicative and storytelling devices that influence models of coping with and coming to terms with it. At the same time, the materialization of failure and subsequent objectivization in the social construction is an observable and essential dimension of what failure is, and how we come to acknowledge it. But most importantly, the dualist stand seems to have been somehow deactivated under the influence of the critical wave we mentioned above. If there is something that stands out in relation to the current work on failure, it is certainly the overtly critical approach, and the prevalence of the tendency to reimagine failure anew.

This observation, certainly, is not meant to downplay or ignore the role of advanced treatments and solid analytical frameworks on failure. Even if not outright embedded, we still perceive quite clearly how contemporary critical accents in the framing of failure occur in a context of already existing attempts to understand failure in particular domains – such as policy studies, international relations and development, management, and organization studies. On the other hand, we should also ask: Can we explore failure contemporarily in a manner that is not critical? To what extent is this critical component a recent manifestation, and how can we be reflexive about our own failure criticism?

The answer suggested by the Handbook is that contemporary critical framing of failure is a reading that somehow imposes itself. The language and perception of contemporary unexpected events and crises is to a great extent challenging and linked with contestation. We do not trust unexpected events, crises, and failures anymore. As indicated by various authors, contemporary crises are being framed as failures, engaging a series of emotions, expectations, and forms of analysis projectively and retrospectively that result in judgements of valuation with distinct framing and contestation effects. Failure and the imaginary of failure that guides the perception of policy responses and governance measures are constitutive elements of the critical rhetoric in relation to contemporary unexpected events and crises.

The scepticism towards contemporary crises and failures has materialized far beyond a lack of trust in science, or what Callon (1998) analysed in terms of “hot situations.” COVID-19, the most globally visible and contested crisis that occurred in relation to public health, has also been unique and groundbreaking in terms of highlighting the issue of public compliance

linked to a lack of trust in institutions. This lack of trust entered a new level and new modality of materialization of this inherent criticism and scepticism that concerns, one way or another, contemporary crises and failures. In this context, it is not without relevance that COVID-19 has been highly associated with both a rhetoric of failure and the issues of inequality and invisibility. COVID-19 has, after all, been termed time and again the inequality virus. This indicating that the critical attitude, lack of trust, and preoccupation with inequality and invisibility are not so much an original trait of failure studies as rather the contemporary imprint of the rhetoric and political preoccupations of our time.

In this sense, it is important to specify how the move towards critical failure studies manifests. To what extent does this concretize in particular analytical findings and assumptions? And how broad and isomorphic is this critical tendency really?

As the chapters in the Handbook indicate, the move towards critical failure studies occurs because of emerging reflectivity regarding the constitution of failure and the effects of existing norms of success. It is linked with the proliferating scope of drawing attention to the points wherein this regime of failure might be reconstituted or reinterpreted in a more or less radical manner. In this sense, we see, neoliberalism becomes a target of this critical turn because of the efforts of current explorations of failure to place it in relation to the existing policy and economic models – which, as it happens, now have a clear neoliberal imprint. The neoliberal context, however, does not have to be present for the failure approach to be rendered as critical. As long as the logic of how failure is constituted and operates is put under scrutiny, the critical approach is critical enough as it is. This means that taking issue with neoliberalism, although probably the most visible manifestation of the move towards critical failure studies, does not have to dominate in order for failure studies to manifest as critical. Reinterpretations of failure that are genealogical and interdisciplinary in nature are also critical of failure because of taking issue with the effects of exclusion, inequality, and the invisibility of how norms of success and achievement operate in society. This is because of redefinitions of failure on the terrain of science and experiments that do not as such appear to be politicized, yet they are visionary because they aim to change the perception or even the rules of how failure games operate.

The chapters also suggest that the shift towards the critical view goes hand in hand with the advancing of readings of failure that are genealogical and open to interdisciplinary dialogue and explorations. Recent work on failure is not solely about studying the events of failure but the processes and structures that lead to failure. The critical rhetoric and epistemological scrutiny are not voiced in relation to episodic materialization of failure, failure as an event. Rather they aim to make the complexity of relations, institutions, and understandings that constitute failure in its current shape the subject matter of the discussion. In this sense, the criticism, even if embedded inevitably in the contemporary narratives of contestation and reassessment, is nevertheless of substance because it unfolds according to a certain logic of deciphering the constitution of the contemporary regimes and cultures of failure, and the possibilities of challenging and changing this constitution with the aim of rendering failure a tool for integration and inclusion.

## **The Structure of the Handbook**

This volume is divided into five thematic parts, with some topics resonating in many of the chapters, and bringing together distinct scholarly disciplines or areas of research. Below we briefly present the structure of the volume and the main claims of the individual chapters.

## *Part 1 Critical Failure Studies in the Making*

The Handbook opens with analyses that unravel the dynamics of the work on failure in selected disciplines in the social sciences. It allows us to discover pioneering explorations on failure, as well as to unravel research that has been evolving for some time now. This is a broader meeting with distinct analytical traditions on failure, articulated inquiries, critical perspectives under construction, as well as with speculations about great absences of failure interrogations that we expect would be unfolding and yet they are not. The authors specify terminologies, share secrets of particular framings, and allow us to understand where knowledge production on failure comes from.

Milene Mendes de Oliveira walks the readers through applied linguistic formulations of failure, highlighting semantic, pragmatic, and interactional types of failure in intercultural communication. She reviews and contrasts critically distinct analytical frameworks – critical-theoretical and postmodernist, as well as philosophical and pragmatic. Mendes de Oliveira highlights that critical and post-structural theories of communication overemphasize the issue of difference and failure. Failures are inherent in communication processes; they are caused by the differences between the sociolinguistic backgrounds to which the interlocutors belong. Failures refer to the foundation of communication, while also being a source of its dynamism because of the usual efforts to negotiate inadequacies in intercultural communication contexts.

Heli Helanummi-Cole and Rohini Jalan claim that studies of entrepreneurial failures require more focus on the context of failure. So far, the scholarly literature on entrepreneurial failure is dominantly actorcentric. The two perspectives are not in competition, but they are complementary, and that is why there is a need for more studies focusing on context. The authors propose employing the lenses of embeddedness, social construction, and materiality. They remind us that the actor-context division is artificial, and we cannot understand one without taking the other into account. Helanummi-Cole and Jalan also call for more studies on the multidimensionality of contexts in the projected future development of entrepreneurial failure and explain the methodological implications of theoretical co-working.

Henrik Gustafsson, Paul Davis, and Louise Davis review the literature on dealing with fear of failure in sport. Sport, as a highly competitive and evaluation-oriented social arena, deals with failure as a common yet still not normalized or habituated experience. Fear of failure often takes over. Although a deeply individual experience, the authors show how fear of failure is conceptualized as a function of the performers' interaction with significant others, and the desire to avoid diminishing subsequent evaluation. They further review the category of burnout in sportsmanship and how it is connected to failure in competitive sports. Gustafsson, Davis, and Davis discuss findings on decreasing the debilitating effects of fear of failure, thus connecting with inquiry beyond the field of competitive sportsmanship.

Julia Gruhlich provides an overview of the interest in failure within career studies. She engages in a genealogical exploration of the idea of career in relation to the processes of modernization and individualization. She traces how career failure or success came to be constructed as an individual experience in accordance with normative models used to evaluate employers or professionals as being successful. Gruhlich points to literature indicating how representatives of many social categories do not fit these models, and thus find themselves in a generally disadvantaged position with regard to standard and socially valued upward mobility career paths. Careers are structured by social and organizational contexts with their own logic of success and failure that imposes inequalities, but also themselves undergo change and challenges from bottom-up routines.

Amélie Petit draws attention to sociologists' ongoing interest in clinical trials as a means of managing the failure of conventional treatments, but not as an experimental situation that itself produces failure. She discusses that failed trials are invisible to the public and scholars alike not least because of the specific policies of non-publication applied by academic journals. Based on the results of her own research on how neurologists and clinical researchers manage the failure of experimental anti-Alzheimer's treatments, Petit argues that embracing failure in clinical trials is worthwhile and beneficial inasmuch as it allows for the production of new knowledge. She advocates for the development of a genuinely sociological research programme on failure and its conditions for production and reception.

Thorsten Peetz, Frank Meier, and Désirée Waibel explore levels and modalities of problematization of failure by valuation studies. They show how practices of valuation in recent decades changed due to the processes of economization and digitalization. The authors point to three varieties of failing valuations: errors and biases, unintended consequences, and failing institutionalization. Their analysis further discusses the potential point of intersection between the sociology of valuation and failure studies via the phenomenon of failure judgements. The authors review how these judgements are contingent on mechanisms of valuation themselves, and are embedded in a complex epistemic, normative, and institutional context, and call for more focus on and a better conceptualization of their context – that is, the valuation constellations of valuers, values and their audiences.

## Part 2 *Failure Regimes and Power*

This part turns readers' attention to the mechanisms of failure and failing, and to how regimes of failure are assembled over time and across different fields. It brings to the fore and renders explicit the power of failure and the dynamics of the configuration of failure relations, rhetoric, and expectations in contemporary society. Further, this is a section about the *birth of failure*, to paraphrase Foucault's (1977a) research on the social and regulatory mechanisms that facilitated the consolidation of the Western penal system in modernity. The approach has all the qualities of what Foucault is known to have termed genealogical. However, we should make the point outright, the analytical registry is not assumed, and it is not framed to be genealogical as such. Nor do we find a bridge to Foucault (except in Oliver Kessler's chapter and that of Liisa Kurunmäki, Andrea Mennicken, and Peter Miller, wherein the connection is explicitly assumed). The genealogical perspective naturally and critically imposes itself, without being backed up formally by a methodological canon, which makes it even more interesting to try to understand where this synergy in approaching failure comes from, and how it is conducted in particular contexts and disciplines.

The authors bring contributions that stretch from failure at the level of individual identity to failure in international relations. Susie Scott, illustratively, engages with research on failure by developing the sociology of nothing. She indicates how *nothing, becoming a non-* are micro processes that are formed through social processes that are yet to be explored in terms of how they constitute themselves and impact social meaning. Scott brings her own explorations that support how seemingly failed identities (the ones that are purposefully not chosen/refused and the ones that simply happened not to form) have power to create something new. Negative phenomena can be valorised if individuals perform "reverse identity work" in order to make sense of their lost experiences and incorporate them into their life stories.

Oliver Kessler takes up the issue of contingency of failure in relation to the broader epistemology of neoliberal governmentality, with its sayable and visible dimensions respectively (à

la Foucault). He identifies three possible framings: failure as empirical irregularity, failure as miscommunication, and failure as mode of organization. Further demonstrating the puzzling phenomenon of misrepresentation or simplification of failure, he opens the discussion into the epistemology of failure in neoliberalism, which reduces the contingent complexity of failure situations and advances the framings in terms of empirical irregularity. In the long run, this allows for the consolidation of neoliberal beliefs in markets and the advancement of distinct, simplified modalities of coping with governance and market failures.

Wolfgang Seibel puts successful failure into perspective. He takes the idea of getting something positive from failure to the level of a more generalized discussion, primarily in military and organizational contexts. In this chapter, the author explores the situational and institutionalized varieties of successful failure, each of which can be intended or unintended. The implications of the bridge between failure and unintentionality-related aspects have analytical ramifications. He demonstrates how there is a problem at the meta and the imaginary level to perceive of failure and misconduct as intended. Seibel's ideas synergize well with critical inquiries currently ongoing in the context of visible derailment and changing circumstances in terms of policy-making and crisis governance.

Jessamy Perriam introduces failure and accountability for failure from the angle of science and technology studies. She traces the evolution of public demonstrations of knowledge from the theatre of proof and public experimentation to the theatre of use mediated by information technology. Perriam problematizes the inherent bias towards success when accounting for these forms. She discusses how this is challenged due to the contemporary digitalization of social settings and the emergence of the theatre of failure. Perriam brings in the case study of Transport of London (TfL) to show that, in spite of the accountability potential in using digital and social media to demonstrate disruption in customer service settings, the power relations remain nevertheless unequal in the theatre of failure.

Liisa Kurunmäki, Andrea Mennicken, and Peter Miller switch readers' attention to the emergence and assembling of specific failure regimes by studying the co-construction of entities, ideas, and infrastructures. Adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach to the analysis of failure, they first examine the economising of failure for the corporate world (in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century) in order to then unravel how it has been transposed to the public sphere, to hospital-based healthcare in England (twenty-first century). The authors postulate that failure has to be denaturalised, that is, deprived it of its self-evidence. Kurunmäki, Mennicken, and Miller call for consideration of the calculative infrastructures that operationalise the ideas of failing and failure, and enable them to be acted upon.

Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer zoom in on how failure narratives are constructed in the field of foreign policy. They bridge failure studies with narrative analysis, with implications that go well beyond derailments and failures in international relations. While the very definition of failure as well as the attribution of its causes and holding actors responsible for failure in foreign policy can be seen as a result of narrative performance, Oppermann and Spencer also see limits to construction, for example, in power inequalities between different actors, or the very predictability of narrative structures themselves. They call for an intersubjective view on failure in the field and tackle the possibility of narrative learning from failure.

In a similar vein, Andreas Kruck tackles the issues of the substance and meaning of mistakes and failures in international relations, as well as their causes. The author addresses critically the contrasted views on these matters offered by objectivist and interpretivist approaches. The distribution and negotiability of the responsibility for failures, and the potential political costs these processes entail for the individual and institutional actors are considered an important argument for the reconciliation of the purely constructivist and purely realist views of failure. Kruck builds

on impressive knowledge that allows him to argue the value of the (sub-)disciplinary plurality of approaches in the future study of mistakes and failures in international relations.

### *Part 3 Restoring, Learning, and Attributing Blame for Failure*

This part moves from the issue of the constitution and substance of regimes of failure and inherent power relations to the problem of how the social world is made and remade through failure over and over again. It brings together authors who discuss a variety of relations with failure in terms of learning, coping, steering, acknowledging, blame-giving, and even planning and anticipating through design and policymaking. The chapters unravel the infrastructure of regimes of failure, and the interconnectedness of failure with processes and social entities, such as governance, markets, and organizations. This part reveals the operation of failure, and policymaking and organizing through failure, while also allowing us to perceive distinct levels of professionalization and the rationalization of approaches to failure, which occur as embedded in organizational routines, institutional experiences, and everyday behavioural patterns.

Jérôme Denis and David Pontille connect failure studies with the idea of maintenance, which allows us to highlight theoretical details, analytical shifts, and potential conceptual dynamics in how science and technology studies (STS) approach breakdown and repair. The authors combine the STS literature overview with the pointed and novel argumentation on maintenance based on a very interesting selection of cases from ethnographies and the artistic-feminist practice of the art of maintenance. They discuss how the art and mundane routine of maintenance allows for a reconsideration of failure. The authors also address how recalibrating failure as “mundane trouble” – instead of the usual failure as “exceptional event” – is not solely an epistemological and normative project but also a political one.

In a similar vein, A.R.E. Taylor explores the logic and infrastructure of digital failure. He indicates how cloud backup and continuously upgraded tools of restoration render digital failure directly manageable through online and remote technological strategies. Taylor shows how technology shifts cultural imaginary, for example, transforming the meaning given to failure. Failure, or what herein was depicted as a disruptive event, now stops being “disruptive.” It becomes the “norm.” Taylor brilliantly explores how the new technological possibilities and recompositions of failure imaginaries that the cloud infrastructure entails are approached and anticipated in the relevant literature of philosophical and ethnographic provenance.

Bob Jessop discusses the inevitability of failure in contemporary governance and builds a broader argument regarding possible normative and ideological implications. He approaches the issue taxonomically as well as pedagogically. On the one hand, he outlines varieties of failure and indicates “criteria of failure” for distinct modes of governance – markets, organizations, networks, and solidarity – and metagovernance responses. Governance, Jessop argues, entails practices of reflexively interacting with varieties of failure, and even choosing within them. On the other hand, signalling the emancipatory and social fulfilling potential linked with the inescapability of failure in conditions of complexity. Responses to failure, and the “tendential inevitability of failure” entertain the structure of opportunity for negotiating the modalities and range of governance.

Michael Howlett, in a similar vein, advances a two-level investigation: the varieties of policy failures and the modality of advancing policy learning. Based on the relevant literature, the author distinguishes policy accidents, mistakes, fiascos, and anomalies. He also introduces the work by Allan McConnell on the political, programme, and process dimensions of policy failure and highlights its revolutionary impact on understanding the process of policy learning. Howlett’s chapter is one of the few that also speaks directly to the issue of policy success, and not solely



failure. He notes the multidimensional character of both of these, and further specifies distinct modalities of policy learning (e.g. deep/shallow), and the assumptions, dilemmas, and policy contradictions underlying these.

Christian Frankel clarifies market failure-related processes and unravels the performative constitution of market dynamics. Triggered to uncover an answer to the question “What is a market such that it can fail?” the author analyses market failures in relation to three ways of perception: as a physical marketplace, as a place of resource allocation, and as a market for public concerns. He thus discusses markets as failures, failures as a lack of efficient allocation, and failures of design that provoke redesign. This is less of an encompassing genealogy, and more of an X-ray to see how market failures interact and impact the dynamics of markets themselves. In particular, Frankel discusses the performativity of economics and the recurrent policy and economic behaviour of advancing markets as a solution to market failures, instead of the habitual government solutions.

Jan Hayes and Sarah Maslen focus on the perceptions and attitudes towards failure in industrial organizations. They explore why learning from failure is still deficient. While positive sides of failure have been noticed in management research since the early 1990s (the productive potential of policy failure; learning by exploration, i.e. learning from failure), the tolerance to failure remains low in organizations, and their attitudes to failure are externally focused. Juxtaposing industrial engineers’ and managers’ attitudes to failure, Hayes and Maslen seek to find a more adequate and productive understanding of organizational failure. They conclude that until organizations see success and failure as two sides of the same coin – both arising from the same set of organizational practices – any further progress in preventing industrial disasters is unlikely.

Sandra Resodihardjo focuses on blame games that unfold in the aftermath of crises, making a point about the tendency of processes of blaming to overshadow learning. The author mobilizes the angle of crisis management studies and public administration, in order to outline the structure of the blame game process and highlight the crucial role of framing in how accountability is attributed and reassigned. Resodihardjo zooms in on blame games that are enacted in multilevel governance systems where actors use complexity to diffuse accountability, for example, by moving blame to other actors. The chapter offers some venues for future research on blame games, for example, by pointing at the heuristic potential of the COVID-19 epidemic characterized by high complexity and global reach. Resodihardjo also suggests that both the lack of and the excess of accountability mechanisms should be further researched.

#### *Part 4 Failure Trouble and Resistance in Neoliberalism*

What happens when failure does not work? When the failure regimes that have been developed in relation to policy and economic models begin to show signs of fatigue? When the failures of neoliberalism are “exhausted” (to paraphrase Beckert’s (2020) “exhausted futures of neoliberalism”), or when we encounter “failure trouble” and “subversion” of failure regimes (to paraphrase Butler’s (1990) “gender trouble”)? When that which is supposed to be hidden by failure and failure solutions is not hidden anymore? When the inequality and depressing effects of failure become too overwhelming? Or the social, market, and political material is simply tired? The fourth part gathers contributions that scrutinize critically contemporary failure mechanisms and indicate macro and micro dimensions wherein failure regimes emerge as problematic. The discussions scratch the political, ideological, material, and personal surface of failure. They divulge points of problematization and resistance to failure, and the manufacturing of possibilities and spontaneous manifestation of new ideas and social movements in relation to failure. The chapters’ critical stance is that failure anomie is widespread because today’s regimes entail mechanisms



to bypass rules of accountability for failures imposed on the world more or less strategically. This part elevates the role of the social sciences in exposing these mechanisms and breaking the vicious circle whereby the dominant regimes defend themselves.

Writing against the dominant approaches of neoclassical utilitarianism as well as postmodernism, Jocelyn Pixley demonstrates how failure, and not success, underlies the capitalist banking system, arguably the most powerful actor in shaping contemporary societies. While the limelight is on the spectacular success of the financial elites and the wrongly understood “survival of the fittest” principle is prophesied, the system triggers numerous and spectacular failures, the causes of which are, however, dissociated from financiers while their effects burden someone else (individuals, societies, states, etc.). Combining the analysis of classical sociological debates with her own in-depth research among financial elites, Pixley demonstrates that banks turn their massive failures into making more people destitute.

Kelly Fagan Robinson and Timothy Carroll focus on the material culture of failure. Elaborating on the notion of affordance, they suggest that the normative anticipations of the body influence the design of policy and its implementation. Policy failure occurs because of an incommensurability between the capacities of the flesh of the people who are subjects of the policies, on the one hand, and the idealism of the neoliberal person, on the other. The authors warn that any form of governance which rests on the normative assumption such as is found in ableism, racism, sexism, or other forms of prejudicial discrimination, would likely show similar forms of material failure. They propose that the relationship between biopolitical control and the negative impacts brought about by incorrectly delimiting affordances of bodies and other materials of life need to be further explored.

Max Haiven offers a critical perspective on failure as an intrinsic element of financialization. He first outlines what financialization is in terms of period, process, and logic. After indicating linkages between failure and financialization, Haiven turns to the case of the mental health crisis in universities in order to demonstrate how capital’s skewed but powerful imagination of the world in terms of finance places failure at the heart of the university both for students and for the faculty. Being anxious, depressed, and functionally debilitated by the perspective of failure results in students seeking medical help for their condition, yet the biomedicalization of this “epidemic” limits the possibilities of systemic change. Haiven suggests one might treat failure to cope as a new and unconventional form of resistance – a mass refusal, a new form of social movement.

Nicholas Bernards synthesizes literature reviews on neoliberalism, marketization, and failure. The chapter takes us back to the problem also touched upon by Frankel: Is the issue of instating markets as a modality of solving market failures essential to the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism? Are the recurring failures of neoliberalism a characteristic of the broader type of socio-economic systems or formations? Bernards reveals attempts to alleviate global poverty through constituting new financial markets and efforts to institutionalize a market logic. Remarkably, as the author highlights, a considerable part of these efforts was quite experimental, and contingent on the contradictions of (post)colonial economies, which made it that much easier to attribute the development failures to the internal dynamics of the developing countries, and to enforce the persistence of market-based modes of development governance despite these failures.

Raza Saeed critically discusses the development of the idea of state failure and how the shift towards the problematization of state fragility emerged and became institutionalized. Saeed shows the ubiquity of the failed state concept that was coined in the early 1990s to describe states that are unable to undertake their primary functions and for this reason are perceived as a threat to international security. The state failure paradigm is normative because it presents the wealthiest states of the global north as normal and other states, which often had different trajectories due to the history of colonialism, as abnormal. The ideal successful state is a self-referential

myth that is decontextualized from the history of certain societies and set as a goal to be reached by other societies. In this way, Saeed argues, the failure paradigm fails the failed/fragile states and prevents them from gaining stability.

Franz Tobias critically reassesses *fracasomania* – the powerful concept coined by Albert O. Hirschman in the 1960s to describe the phenomenon of obsession with failure. In the original conceptualization, fracasomania urges social actors to offer solutions to long-term policy problems in a quick and holistic fashion. Tobias offers a sophisticated neo-Hirschmanian analysis of fracasomania in the context of neoliberal policy shifts that unfolded in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. He dissects the sense of disappointment that got fostered by neoliberal policy mishaps and the further “shock” triggered by COVID-19 in a healthcare system already marked by a variety of systemic vulnerabilities. This allows Tobias to reframe fracasomania not only by turning attention to the structural conditionality of policy failures, but also by envisaging policy failures as an opportunity for change.

### *Part 5 Post-Failure or Reimagined Failure?*

Each act of problematizing and reinterpreting regimes of failure through resistance is consumed on its own terms. It is also quite difficult to point to a common agenda or manifesto across the social sciences. Reinterpretation of failure regimes is still under construction. This does not mean, however, that there is no analytical and critical behaviour with regard to failure that can be noticed. Likewise, it does not mean that there is no bottom-up, loosely coupled, and spontaneously emerging vocabulary and points of interest around resistance. As the fifth part extraordinarily reveals, redefining and reframing failure, and questioning norms of success, are major themes spontaneously and recurrently engaging various disciplines. This last series of contributions indicates how redefining failure seems to advance two registers. First is what may be termed post-failure, which is linked with the perspective of the inevitability of failure and provides the scope to render failure as a tool for success as well as the possibility and practice of doing so, for instance, through successful failure in science, management, technology, and experimentation. Second, redefining failure also advances through reimagining. This is a more radical stand regarding norms of success that engages new epistemology, power relations, and rules of the game.

Matthias Gross investigates how thinking about failure evolves when viewed in relation to ignorance, experiment, surprise, and risk. The main argument put forward is that failure may become a tool for learning and success in knowledge production when approaching ignorance as a condition of knowledge more generally. Gross experiments conceptually with formulas such as useful failure and successful failure, which allows him to reveal how failure may be viewed as a positive, though not desirable, element in the processes of attaining success in science and experimental set-ups as well as how success and failure (mishaps, mistakes, and disappointments) are intertwined. Gross’s argumentation draws on practices in modern science, with concrete implications for reform politics, risk governance, and technology.

Stuart Firestein, complementary to Gross, discusses the modalities of failing successfully in science. He advances an exploration based on a similar premise of ignorance and failure as essential ingredients of successful science. Firestein reveals how failure is not solely a step forward in terms of gaining knowledge, but it is also a resource for dynamism. He unravels current ideas and features of failure such as failing better, acceptable failure, applied failure, rate of failure, failure and adaptability, and failure and pluralism. All these notions are quite demanding and critical in their own way, with Firestein managing to elegantly integrate them in a highly communicative package. Communication about failure, Firestein argues, is the key towards successful knowledge production and fulfilment.

Jeff Malpas and Keith Jacobs inquire into the possibilities for redefining failure in a manner that bypasses its epistemological and political subordination to the idea of success and to the aim of effective control. They explore distinct approaches, such as failure as normative-rhetorical, failure as governmental condition, failure as an inevitable and inherent limit, and failure as a form of engagement. Drawing on explorations of failure in the work of Samuel Beckett, Malpas and Jacobs argue for conceptualizing failure as an inevitable element, resource, and fundamentally a condition for action in politics, bureaucracy, and science. Their exploration indicates how attempts at reinterpreting failure amount to decision-making and taking analytical stands. Choosing to redefine failure beyond the usual impasse or tool for success opens interrogation into the broader linkage of failure and success. It is not only a challenge to epistemology but also to politics.

Susanne Hamscha raises the stakes for challenging and redefining failure by opening the Pandora's box of actual possibility of attaining success by social groups which cut transversal to the norms of success associated with neoliberalism, such as able-bodiedness. Can a disabled life actually be allowed to be a successful life in the neoliberal failure regime? Hamscha shows that redefining failure in relation with this question is an issue not only of establishing a new imaginary, but also of lifting the embargo on epistemological and political access to a fulfilling and non-discriminating epistemology. It is also an issue of democratizing "crip future" by challenging the norm of "ableism," as is discussed by Robinson and Carroll also. Reimagining failure thus entails critical positionality that values knowing and learning through disability and envisages future possibilities and materialities instead of equating crip with failure.

Thomas Clément Mercier tackles complementary limitations entailed by the projective norms of success in neoliberalism, and the norm of heterosexuality in particular. The author explores the dynamism of epistemological, identity, and political efforts to reimagine "queer failure," and to energize tools of resistance in relation to it. Mercier shows the points of emancipation as well as complexities in the relation between queer theory, queer activism, and failure. He explains the evolution of queer as a condition of the reimaginary of fallibility, which at the same time attracts the theory's own vulnerability to productive or performative failure. Mercier engages with reflexive avenues for reconsidering the dynamics of queer theory on whole new levels, and conceptualizing the fallibility triggered by the success-failure opposition.

For Ann Cooper Albright, developing a critical perspective on contemporary framings of failure and norms of success is not a central task. Rather, she advances a well thought-out and experienced strategy for dealing with the anxiety of failure that builds on a recognized philosophy and practice of body and movements. Albright takes issue with the cultural regime of falling as failing, further exploring the dynamics of failure embodiment in alternative forms inspired by experiences of falling in dance and performance. Albright argues for overcoming progressively the debilitating effects of fear of falling. She supports a broader synergy between performance and dance studies, philosophy, and history that would help reimagine failure based on somatic practices and advance understanding of contemporary anxiety and panic regarding cultural, economic, and political failures.

Janet O'Shea takes the study of failure one step further, engaging critically with visions of failure that rely on redefinition. Arguing that redefinition deflects attention from the structural inequalities that render failure devastating, she denounces the individualization of failure promoted by neoliberalism and proposes to reimagine the role of risk, pain, and failure in daily life. O'Shea applies this postulate to urban cycling in the US, highlighting the aspects of failure and physicality as well as refusing to accept the "there is no alternative" formula. She suggests

that reimagination allows us to reduce failure's impact by changing the terms of interaction and producing a new framework that results in failure being both less likely and less painful. O'Shea argues for alternatives to neoliberalism's exposure of citizens to failures they didn't consent to.

## Note

- 1 The work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the research project "Failures and Public Policy: The Possible, the Contingent and the Chance in the Polish Context," number 2019/33/B/HS5/00232.

## References

- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. London: Profile Books.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Albright, Ann Cooper. 2019. *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun, and Neta Alexander. 2020. *Failure*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bailes, Sara Jane. 2011. *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. London: Routledge.
- Baines, Darrin, Sharron Brewer, and Adrian Kay. 2020. "Political, Process and Programme Failures in the Brexit Fiasco: Exploring the Role of Policy Deception." *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 5: 742–60.
- Beamish, Thomas D. 2002. *Silent Spill: The Organization of an Industrial Crisis*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Beckert, Jens. 2020. "The Exhausted Futures of Neoliberalism: From Promissory Legitimacy to Social Anomy." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 13, no. 3: 318–30.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Best, Jacqueline. 2014. *Governing Failure: Provisional Expertise and the Transformation of Global Development Finance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Best, Jacqueline. 2016. "When Crises Are Failures: Contested Metrics in International Finance and Development." *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 1: 39–55.
- Boin, Arjen, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell. 2009. "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests." *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 1: 81–106.
- Bovens, Mark, and Paul 't Hart. 2016. "Revisiting the Study of Policy Failures." *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 5: 653–66.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Callon, Michel. 1998. "An Essay on Framing and Overflowing: Economic Externalities Revisited by Sociology." In *The Laws of the Markets*, edited by Michel Callon, 244–69. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Capano, Giliberto, and Jun Jie Woo. 2017. "Resilience and Robustness in Policy Design: A Critical Appraisal." *Policy Sciences* 50, no. 3: 399–426.
- Cassidy, John. 2010. *How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities*. London: Penguin.
- Collier, Stephen J., and Andrew Lakoff. 2021. *The Government of Emergency: Vital Systems, Expertise, and the Politics of Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dunlop, Claire, ed. 2020. *Policy Learning and Policy Failure*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Easterling, Keller. 2019. "A Losing Game: Harnessing Failure." *The Architectural Review*, February 4. Accessed September 28, 2022. [www.architectural-review.com/essays/a-losing-game-harnessing-failure](http://www.architectural-review.com/essays/a-losing-game-harnessing-failure)
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eriksson, Kerstin, and Allan McConnell. 2011. "Contingency Planning for Crisis Management: Recipe for Success or Political Fantasy?" *Policy and Society* 30, no. 2: 89–99.
- Erkan, Ekin. 2020. "Review of Failure, and Discussion with Neta Alexander." *Media Theory*, June 15. Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://mediatheoryjournal.org/review-of-failure-and-discussion-with-neta-alexander-by-ekin-erkan/>
- Fail-sharing.org. 2021. *Fail!*
- Failed Architecture (nd). <https://failedarchitecture.com/>

- Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Fisher, Tony, and Eve Katsouraki. 2018. *Beyond Failure: New Essays on the Cultural History of Failure in Theatre and Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977a. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977b. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 139–64. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Frankel, Christian, José Ossandón, and Trine Pallesen. 2019. "The Organization of Markets for Collective Concerns and Their Failures." *Economy and Society* 48, no. 2: 153–74.
- Frantzen, Mikkel Krause. 2019. *Going Nowhere, Slow: The Aesthetics and Politics of Depression*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Goodley, Dan, and Rebecca Lawthom. 2019. "Critical Disability Studies, Brexit and Trump: A Time of Neoliberal–Ableism." *Rethinking History* 23, no. 2: 233–51.
- Goodley, Dan, Rebecca Lawthom, Kirsty Liddiard, and Katherine Runswick-Cole. 2019. "Provocations for Critical Disability Studies." *Disability & Society* 34, no. 6: 972–97.
- Gabel, Ilene. 2017. *When Things Don't Fall Apart: Global Financial Governance and Developmental Finance in an Age of Productive Incoherence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Haack, Patrick, and Andreas Rasche. 2021. "The Legitimacy of Sustainability Standards: A Paradox Perspective." *Organization Theory* 2, no. 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877211049493>
- Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1973 [1963]. *Journeys towards Progress: Studies in Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*. New York: Norton.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Howlett, Michael. 2022. "Avoiding a Panglossian Policy Science: The Need to Deal with the Darkside of Policy-Maker and Policy-Taker Behaviour." *Public Integrity* 24, no. 3: 306–318.
- Howlett, Michael, M. Ramesh, and Xun Wu. 2015. "Understanding the Persistence of Policy Failures: The Role of Politics, Governance and Uncertainty." *Public Policy and Administration* 30, no. 3–4: 209–20.
- Kaplan, Erin. 2020. "La Chica Boom and the Pedagogy of Queer Failure." *Theatre Topics* 30, no. 2: 85–97.
- Kruck, Andreas, Kai Oppermann, and Alexander Spencer, eds. 2018. *Political Mistakes and Policy Failures in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kurunmäki, Liisa, and Peter Miller. 2011. *The Failure of a Failure Regime: From Insolvency to De-Authorisation for NHS Foundation Trusts*. London: CARR Discussion Paper 67: 1–35.
- Lahiji, Nadir. 2019. *An Architecture Manifesto: Critical Reason and Theories of a Failed Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Lambert, Jean-Pierre. 2018. "Blame Culture vs. Fail Culture: What's Your Company's?" May 8. Accessed February 27, 2022. <https://jp-lambert.me/blame-culture-vs-fail-culture-whats-your-company-s-52568738e686>
- Lavinas, Lena. 2020. "Doomed to Fail: Unmasking Failure as a Powerful Engine of Accumulation in Contemporary Capitalism – Appadurai Arjun and Neta Alexander, Failure (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, 145 p.)." *European Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3: 419–422.
- McGoey, Linsey. 2012. "The Logic of Strategic Ignorance." *The British Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 3: 553–76.
- Mercier, Thomas Clément. nd. "Ethics of Failure: Thinking Legitimacy beyond Performativity and Ontology." [www.academia.edu/13598865/Ethics\\_of\\_Failure\\_Thinking\\_Legitimacy\\_beyond\\_Performativity\\_and\\_Ontology](http://www.academia.edu/13598865/Ethics_of_Failure_Thinking_Legitimacy_beyond_Performativity_and_Ontology)
- Mitchell, David, Sharon Snyder, and Linda Ware. 2016. "Curricular Cripistemologies: The Crip/Queer Art of Failure." In *Das Geschlecht der Inklusion*, edited by Jürgen Budde, Susanne Offen, and Anja Tervooren, 37–54. Opladen, Berlin, and Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- North, Douglass. C. 1994. "Economic Performance through Time." *The American Economic Review* 84, no. 3: 359–68.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2018. *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Paterson, Matthew. 2016. "The Sociological Imagination of Climate Futures." In *Reimagining Climate Change*, edited by Paul Wapner and Hilal Elver, 14–28. New York: Routledge.
- Perrow, Charles. 1999. *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2020. *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Cambridge: Polity
- Sassen, Saskia. 2016. "Economic Cleansing: Failure Dressed in Fine Clothes." *Social Research* 83, no. 3: 673–87.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

- Stanford d.school. nd. *Fail faster* (class). Accessed February 27, 2022. <https://dschool.stanford.edu/classes/fail-faster>
- Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2010. *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2016. *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*. London and New York: Verso.
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2007. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House.
- Tedde, Adriano A. 2022. *Marginalisation and Utopia in Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits: The Other America*. London: Routledge.
- Vaughan, Diane. 1996. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yazell, Bryan. 2020. "A Sociology of Failure: Migration and Narrative Method in US Climate Fiction." *Configurations* 28, no. 2: 155–80.